CHAPTER 6

THE GNOSTIC SOPHIA: DIVINE GENERATIVE VIRGIN

Angeleen Campra

This chapter presents Sophia of the Gnostic texts as one manifestation of the long line of powerful female deities discussed previously. Sophia, the Virgin, is divine generative force, fundamental life energy that manifests as the generation of life through the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth; as the wisdom inherent in the expression and order of the universe.

This divine female authority, long unacknowledged in the West, is firmly situated within historical Jewish and Christian traditions. She is present as *Hochma*—literally, "Wisdom"—in the Hebrew wisdom literature of the fifth to first centuries B.C.E., predating the Hellenized *Sophia*, also "Wisdom," of later Greek translations and texts. This latter manifestation, in turn, predates the anglicized *Wisdom* of later English translations of these texts. Sophia's story is central to the Hellenized Valentinian Gnostic creation myth of the first century C.E., and her strong voice in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* establishes her authority through her connections to a long line of ancient deities.

When I speak of Sophia as divine generative force, I am referring to that numinous energy of Source that humans call "divine" and that manifests as the intelligent generation and continuation of life through the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Sophia and various other female deities, some of whom have been discussed in this book, are manifestations of that deep underlying energy that for millennia has been associated with generativity, fecundity, life, death, decay, order, and wisdom. That is, they are emblems of the "wisdom" inherent in that

M. Rigoglioso, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*
© Marguerite Rigoglioso 2010

generative progression of life and order. In her early Hebrew manifestation as *Hochma*/Wisdom, Sophia was there, before all creation, "from the beginning" (Proverbs 8:23, New Jerusalem Bible). The wisdom and order of the system existed before the system even manifested itself, much in the way a seed holds within it the entire potentiality of the plant that will grow from it. In examining the ancient texts, I have come to the conclusion that Sophia of the Gnostic tradition, as the exemplar of divine generative force, existed "when,"[1] in that liminal time before "the beginning," *before the starting point of our current creation stories*. I posit, in short, that she is, like Athena/Neith, a Prime Mover, an autogenetic goddess who created herself out of the All. In this chapter, I discuss evidence to support this image of the Gnostic Sophia as a primordial Virgin Mother.

Sophia as Bridge to an Older Paradigm

Much of the richness, as well as the tensions, in Sophia's Valentinian Gnostic story can be traced to her relationship with two ancient and differing worldviews. One posits a *generated universe*, in which the divine is immanent in what is manifested, and interconnection and unity of life are the norm. Another posits a *created universe*, in which the divine is separate and remote from creation, and separation and opposition are the norm. A generated universe, in which the connection between Source and creation is seen as fundamental, allows "differentiation" to exist without diminishment or devaluation. A created universe, on the other hand, in which Source and creation are seen as disconnected, encourages a hierarchically dualistic worldview based on opposition.

Sophia's story bridges these two cosmologies. In doing so, it reveals, in microcosm, how humans have conceived the divine image and how they have moved from materiality to abstraction, from Earth to Wisdom to the Word. When viewed through the ideology of a created universe, Sophia is an enigma full of paradox and contradiction. When seen from the more ancient perspective of a generated universe, however, she expresses complexity and wholeness.

Her story speaks of times of cultural change and upheaval (Cady, Ronan, and Taussig 1989, 50–53; Schroer 2000, 30–33). As the Gnostics redrew the heavens to attempt to better understand their earthly uncertainties, they expanded their image of the divine. Pagels (1979, 49) says of the Gnostic texts that, although "their language is . . . unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage, instead of describing a monistic and masculine God, many of these texts speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements." This expansion of the divine image to include a Mother/Father Source appears to express a void felt by the Gnostics